Gerson's TechCom E-Notes

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From the Front Line

Gil Charney (CPA, CFP), Director of Tax Training at H&R Block, manages a staff of a dozen writers whose mission is to "produce up-to-date, accurate, well-written tax training material and course textbooks for 80,000 tax professionals nationwide." That's a hard job!

Why? Gil and his staff must overcome numerous challenges to create their tax courses, including the following:

Audience Recognition: H&R Block's tax preparation professionals are a broad audience. Some are CPAs and experienced tax preparers, but many do not have extensive tax backgrounds. They are all ages and come from all walks of life. To communicate effectively to this diverse audience, Gil and his staff try to write their documentation using common, easily understandable language to explain complex tax laws.

Complex Subject Matter: Most of us seek expert guidance with our taxes because tax laws are incredibly complex . . . and they change constantly when new laws or regulations are enacted. Gil's staff must stay up to date by researching our changing tax laws. In addition, Gil and his staff create over 50 different tax courses. These include courses on estates, employment taxes, farms, corporations and partnerships, gift taxation, foreign income taxation, and sole proprietorships, as well as tax information for individuals who are retired, in the military, or in the clergy.

Diverse Deliverables: As with most technical writers today, Gil doesn't depend solely on hard-copy text. He and his group also produce intranet training material. In addition to explaining tax law and providing common examples and applications, Gil's group focuses heavily on case studies, tasks that spotlight diverse tax areas and show through fact-based exercises how changes in tax laws will affect clients. Much of the writing from Gil's group is blended, allowing for online, hard-copy textbook, hands-on activities, and face-to-face classroom instruction.

Accuracy: Imagine that your tax preparer has made an error on your taxes. This not only would negatively impact your income status, but also errors made by H&R Block tax preparers would negatively impact the company's credibility. Gil and his staff make every effort to produce training materials that are as free from error as possible. With a staff of several writers, consistency is always a challenge. For example, the writers must ensure that H&R Block's dozens of courses consistently use periods at the end of bulleted lists (or not); write out, abbreviate, or use a symbol for section codes in legal documents ("Section," "section," "Sec.," "sec.," or §); capitalize or not capitalize "Medicare" and "Social Security"; spell out or not spell out ages ("34" or "thirty-four"). To supply up-to-date tax information that is correct and consistent, Gil's writers follow rigorous review sequences (writers review the work of other writers; proofreaders review written work; editors read all text before publication).

Gil and his staff are talented people whose jobs demand multitasking. They must

- know tax laws
- be able to write clearly, concisely, and correctly
- be technologically savvy, since each writer also must be expert in desktop publishing

Most importantly, Gil and his writers must be empathetic. They must ask themselves about their target audience: "What will our tax preparers need to know when they are preparing their client's tax return?" After all, the 80,000 end users of H&R Block tax training materials will impact millions of people just like you and me. Before our tax preparers can help us, Gil and his staff must anticipate the needs of these tax preparers. Knowing tax laws is important, but audience recognition is essential to the successful conveyance of complex tax information.

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FACTOID

Microsoft PowerPoint (full name **Microsoft Office PowerPoint**) is a presentation program developed for the Microsoft Windows and Mac OS computer operating systems.

Widely used by businesspeople, educators, and trainers, PowerPoint is among the most prevalent forms of persuasion technology.

According to Microsoft Corporation, approximately

"30 million presentations are made with PowerPoint every day."

"http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft_PowerPoint."

Dot.Com Updates

A Few Sites Related to PowerPoint Usage

Finklestein, Ellen. "PowerPoint Tips Blog." http://www.ellenfinkelstein.com/powerpoint_tip.html.
"The PowerPoint FAQ." http://www.pptfaq.com/.
Paradi, Dave. "How to Avoid "Death by PowerPoint."
http://www.communicateusingtechnology.com/articles/avoid_death_by_ppt.htm.
Russell, Wendy. "10 PowerPoint Tutorials for Beginners - How to Use PowerPoint."
http://presentationsoft.about.com/od/powerpoint101/a/begin_guide.htm.
Russell, Wendy. "Tips to Create, Enhance and Deliver Your Business Presentations."
http://presentationsoft.about.com/od/powerpointinbusiness/a/busines_success.htm.
Russell, Wendy. "12 Tips for Delivering a Knockout Business Presentation."
http://presentationsoft.about.com/od/powerpointinbusiness/p/bus_delivery.htm.
Wuorio, Jeff. "Presenting with PowerPoint: 10 dos and don'ts."
http://www.microsoft.com/smallbusiness/resources/technology/business_software/presenting_with_powerpoint_10_dos_and_donts.mspx#EDD.

For opposing points of view regarding PowerPoint, check out the following articles:

Garber, Angela. "Death By Powerpoint" http://www.smallbusinesscomputing.com/biztools/article.php/684871. April 1, 2001.
Tufte, Edward. "PowerPoint Is Evil. Power Corrupts. PowerPoint Corrupts Absolutely."
http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/11.09/ppt2.html.

Archived Newsletters!
Want to access past newsletters, saved as PDF files? Go to the following URL:
http://www.prenhall.com/gerson

Teaching Tactics

Using PowerPoint in Your Classroom

We like PowerPoint!

We know that many people don't (see the Garber and Tufte articles mentioned above). However, we not only see PowerPoint (PPt) used *everywhere* (business, education, training, conferences, government, etc.), but also we consider PPt, when used effectively, to be a wonderful tool for hardcopy text, handouts, and oral presentations.

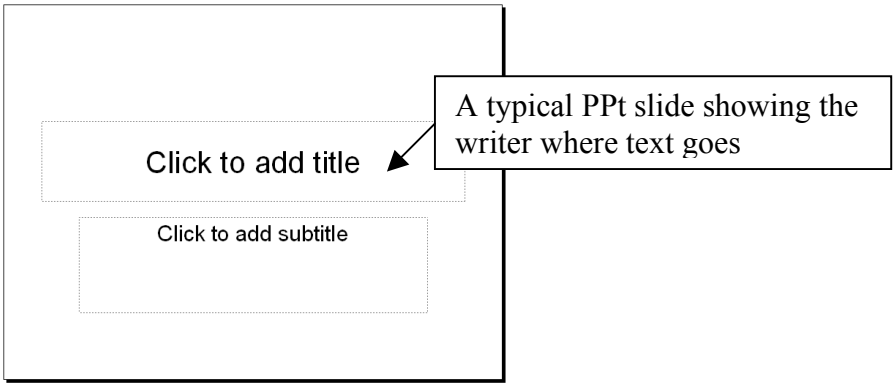
Here's What We Do with PPt.

1. *Long, research proposals*. We ask our students, in teams or individually, to write proposals using PPt. These PPt slides can be printed out and bound as hard copies. In addition, the students use the PPt slides as visual aids when giving their oral presentations.
2. *User Manual*. Students, in teams or individually, write how-to instructional manuals using PPt. These PPt slides can be printed out and bound as hard copies or they can exist as electronic text. When viewed electronically, the user manuals can incorporate hyperlinks, allowing the end user to access parts of the instructional manual as needed.

Why Use PPt?

As noted in the factoid, PPt is ubiquitous in business, industry, and government. We do our students a favor by teaching them effective PPt techniques. In addition, we like to use PPt for assignments (like proposals and user manuals) that traditionally would stick with 8 ½ x 11 Word text for the following reasons:

- A landscape PPt slide layout demands that students write concisely—a valuable tool in technical writing. As noted in Chapter 3, we believe that good technical writing "fits in a box." When students open PPt, they immediately see "boxes" in which text must fit.



- PPt helps our students focus on page layout. With PPt, we can easily discuss the value of headings, subheadings, bulleted points, and graphics.
- PPt allows students to create hyperlinks. We ask our students to hyperlink their headings and subheadings within the table of contents. Then, by clicking on these links, the reader can access any part of the manual or proposal in any order.

Finally, we take the word "technical" in "technical writing" seriously. We believe that it is important for students to learn as much about technology as possible. In the workplace, they will need to be skilled in a variety of technological communication channels. These will include Word, e-mail, Web design, blogging, and instant messaging, for example. Having students write proposals and user manuals as PPt slides gives them an edge in the workplace—while teaching them valuable writing skills.

Case Study

Here's a quick way to help students practice PowerPoint use. In small groups, ask students to create a brief PowerPoint presentation based on the following case study.

Background:

In 2005, the City of Greenleaf created the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) to plan responses to hazardous materials incidents. The LEPC collects and maintains information on the types and quantities of hazardous materials at facilities throughout the City, develops and updates a hazardous materials plan, conducts hazardous materials training courses and exercises, provides technical assistance to city businesses in developing their LEP operational plans, monitors legislation, and works with state representatives involved in issues related to hazardous materials and emergency response.

Budget Considerations:

Funding to support LEPC, including City staff, is provided through the state's Chemical Emergency Preparedness Fund, in the amount of $49,927 for the 2005-2006 fiscal year. LEPC also receives an additional $8,682 from the Hazardous Materials Emergency Preparedness (HMEP) fund for 2005-2006.

Additional Funding Needs:

LEPC studies show a need for $122,980 for successful management of hazardous materials incidents. This amount would fund requirements for technical support, additional staff, specialized equipment, and supplies. Specifically the LEPC needs $5,400 for tech support; $45,610 for additional staff; $65,225 for specialized equipment; and $6,745 for supplies.

Recommendation:

The City of Greenleaf requests authorization to apply for a grant not to exceed $122,980 from the state government.

Editing Practice

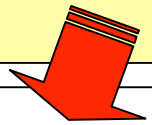
In the following e-mail message, find and correct the apostrophe errors. **[NOTE: Not all sentences are grammatically incorrect. Only correct the actual apostrophe errors.] Check out rules for apostrophes on the next page.**

From: rtatum@cmac.org
To: tbell@cmac.org
Subject:

TayShuan, its probably too early to start planning for next months meeting, but lets consider the following logistics':

- Time: Well want to start early enough in the day to maximize everyones time, but we shouldn't start too early. Im suggesting a start time of 9:00 a.m. with a closing time of 3:30 p.m. That way, our associate's will not be too rushed in the morning but will still be able to accomplish a lot during the day's activities'.
- Food: Lets be sure to keep everyone energized. I suggest coffee and tea in the morning with Danishes'. A heavy lunch wont work. We can keep the calories down with salads and sandwiches, factoring in Tom's and Phyllis' allergies to wheat.
- Hands-on Workshops: No one likes to just sit and listen to a speaker. To keep our employees' engaged, I'm suggesting computer workshops. On each associates' computer station, please load the appropriate software. Loading software on all 12 associates' computers will be time consuming for you, but doing so will allow everyone to be actively involved.
- Certificates: All 12 of the employees' bosses' e-mail messages to me requested certificates showing CEU's. Please print certificates showing that each participant has completed the days workshop and has earned 6 hours of CEU's.

That should take care of our planning, TayShuan. If you have any questions, I'll be happy to help.



Apostrophes

Apostrophes are easy. They only serve two purposes:

- Contractions
- Possession

To use apostrophes correctly, follow these rules:

1. Use apostrophes to create **contractions** (two words shortened and fused together—see the words highlighted in **red**).

Ex: She doesn't work there anymore. She's looking for a new job. I'll try to help her. Can't you help, also?

In the samples above, the apostrophe represents an omitted letter ("o" in "doesn't"; "i" in "she's"; etc.)

2. Use apostrophe to show **possession** (ownership).

Ex: Singular possessive—"**John's** computer has crashed. Yesterday, another **employee's** computer had the same problem."

In the above examples, the ***singular*** subjects "John" and an "employee" possessed their computers. The apostrophes shows their ownership. To show singular possession, the apostrophes precede the final "s."

Ex: Plural possessive—"Six **employees'** computers crashed last week. All six of the **computers'** hard drives proved to be infected with viruses."

In the above examples, the ***plural*** nouns "employees" and "computers" possess the computers and the hard drives. The apostrophes show ownership. To show plural possession, the apostrophes follow the final "s."

Weird exception 1: People always ask, "what if my name ends in an 's,' such as Jones? How do I make this possessive? Do I put the apostrophe after the final 's' or do I add an additional 's'"? The answer is either/or. You can write "The **Jones'** house is located on Elm" or "The **Jones's** house is located on Elm."

Weird exception 2: Which is correct--"it's power supply is located in the basement" or "its power supply is located in the basement"? The first example is incorrect. "It's" is the contraction for "it is," not the possessive form of the word, which is spelled without an apostrophe.

Weird common error 1: People, for some reason, want to use apostrophe to make a word plural, such as "the ten employee's work at Best Buy." That's wrong. The correct version omits the apostrophe, as follows: "the ten employees work at Best Buy."

Weird common error 2: People want to use apostrophes to make abbreviations and acronyms plural, such as "I bought six CPU's." That's wrong. The correct version omits the apostrophe, as follows: "I bought six CPUs."